

Wasatch voters to decide justice center bond issue

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By SONNI SCHWINN
Herald Correspondent

HEBER CITY — Wasatch County citizens will be asked to decide whether the county will be allowed to bond for up to \$5.5 million to build a new justice center, which would house the sheriff's office and jail, a courtroom, court clerk's offices, and the county attorney's office.

The Wasatch County Commission voted Monday to add the question to the Nov. 3 general election ballot, primarily because the county desperately needs a new jail, according to Sheriff Mike Spanos.

"Because of the number of arrests, the number of people who are waiting to serve commitments, we're not even able to fill the court orders on people going into the jail," said Spanos.

The bad news is that if the entire amount is borrowed and used, the owner of a \$70,000 home will be required to pay \$54 per year for 25 years to repay the bond.

The good news is that there are many possibilities for significantly reducing the amount of the bond.

Commissioners are asking residents to approve the highest amount, for the worst case scenario, rather than counting on being able to cut costs. But they vow to keep costs as low as possible and to borrow only what is needed.

The problem is, say commissioners, there isn't enough time to explore cost-saving possibilities before the election, but they consider the matter too urgent to delay putting the matter before the vot-

ers.
Possibilities for cutting costs to the county which were discussed Monday include:

- The state will pay its pro-rated share of expenses for the courtroom and offices associated with state court cases, totalling about one third of the cost of the building. The state could pay the full amount up front, reducing the amount of the bond, or could make annual payments, which would reduce the amount that would be collected from taxpayers.

- The county may also contract with the state to house its prisoners and the amount that would be considered rent for the cells would be applied to the bond payments. The contracts are not the same as when the county houses inmates convicted on state statutes that aren't serious enough for them to be sent to state prison, so they are sentenced to serve time in county jails.

- If Heber City doesn't enact a zoning ordinance, that would force the county to build the facility in an unincorporated area, and if it can be constructed on the site the county owns behind the existing courthouse, as much as \$500,000 in property and utility costs could be saved.

- It will take at least two years to build the structure after the bond is issued. Interest will only be charged on money as it is drawn out for construction, and the balance in the account will earn interest.

New justice center on Wasatch County ballot

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By SONNI SCHWINN
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HEBER CITY — The crowded conditions at the eight-bed Wasatch County jail and the fact that people sentenced to serve jail time must "take a number" to serve their time are just two reasons county voters will be asked on the Nov. 3 ballot to approve a \$5.5 million bond issue to build a new justice center that would include a new jail.



Two more reasons are the projected population growth in the county, both in permanent residents and visitors, and the fact that the existing jail breaks so many laws governing jail facilities that the county is a prime target for lawsuits.

But, even if the taxpayers approve the bond, it will take at least two years to build the new justice building and jail, and Sheriff Mike Spanos says it's already too late.

"During the interim, I don't know how I can physically manage this plant (jail) any longer," he said during a recent interview.

The county may have to contract with neighboring counties to house some of its prisoners until the new jail is ready. If the bond isn't approved, the only alternative will be to send prisoners to other jails until

taxpayers do approve a bond. But, even if using other jails were a realistic alternative, it would only delay building a new facility, not avoid it, Spanos said. In the meantime, a great deal of money would be invested in another county's jail, and a lot of money would simply be wasted.

Because of overcrowding in other counties, some already have inquired about contracts with Wasatch County to house their prisoners, and the state has shown an interest in a contract for its prisoners. That would help pay for the new building, and to operate the jail until the space is filled up with local prisoners.

But the immediate problem is that squeezing 20 men into a facility designed for eight is justification enough for 20 lawsuits, said the sheriff. In addition, there is only one hallway and no windows or additional escape routes out of the jail. In a fire or other emergency in which prisoners could be trapped, the results could be far more tragic than any inmate deserves, and extremely costly to the county because of the justified lawsuits that would inevitably follow, he said. In fact, the county is already liable, just because the possibility exists.

In addition, laws now require jails to provide facilities where prisoners can exercise and breathe fresh air regularly, as well as other civil rights that are no longer withheld from people just because they've been convicted of crimes.

The Editorial P

Editorial

A Few Final Arguments For The New Justice Center

We can't think of anything more that people need to know about the inadequacy of the Wasatch County jail before voting on the justice center bond issue next Tuesday that we haven't covered in our four-part series on the subject. We've focused on the jail because that's the main reason we need the new building, and that's where most of the local tax money will go.

But the proposed building also will include expanded sheriff's office facilities, the county attorney's office, and a courtroom and related office space, which will be paid for by the state, but which also comes from Wasatch County taxpayer.

In today's section of the series, we quote growth projections for the county and the related projections for the prison population. People aren't just arrested by a law enforcement officer, taken to jail, watched and fed for a certain period of time, then released. The effect of growth in crime goes far beyond the jail.

Before a person is sentenced to time in the county jail, there is a police investigation, which often involves interviewing witnesses and victims. Then the investigating officer turns the information over to the county attorney who puts the case together and files formal charges. The case may be in court many times for the arraignment, pleading, trial, sentencing, reviews, and even appeals. The county attorney and law enforcement officers are involved throughout the process, which may include additional investigations, interviews, and plea bargaining.

In the existing building, there is no place in the sheriff's department for private discussions between defendants and their attorneys, witness interviews, or suspect interrogations. Three people can fit in the sheriff's office, but he isn't always involved and needs his office for other things. There is some space and four desks in the squad room, where interviews and interrogations can take place as long as deputies don't need to do paperwork or make phone call, and if nobody cares about privacy, which is seldom the case. Deputies need more space for their desk work; the office needs file space and an evidence room; the sheriff deserves more than a large closet to work in; and his secretary deserves more than a small closet without a window.

The county attorney now leases an office because there's no room for him in the courthouse, and he and his staff belong in the justice building.

The courtroom has been outdated and inadequate since 1970. Sometimes there's not even enough space in the room for all the people that need to be there for a specific case, let alone for those who are waiting for other cases to be called. During court sessions it is common for the hallway to be filled with witnesses waiting for their turns to testify, as well as attorneys and other people waiting for their cases to

come up. The judge often has to send the bailiff out to quiet them down or even clear the hallway because they are disturbing the session.

Whatever is done in a courtroom must be recorded, typed up, filed and retrieved at every defending attorneys' request, as well as for every court appearance. Fines must be kept track of. Court calendars must be organized and amended. Telephone questions must be answered. The office of the clerk and staff that handles those matters must be in the same building as the other court-related offices. In the meantime, as the county grows, county work in general increases. For instance, the demands on the planning office already are too great for one person and a secretary, and the commission room is already too small for hearings in which there is any public interest. Moving out the sheriff's office, jail, and justice system will open up space in the courthouse that will no doubt be needed during the next 20 years just to take care of county business.

Even though we have supported constructing a new justice building from the beginning, we wanted to objectively present both sides of the issue. But we haven't been able to find a down side to this one except for the tax increase. Even so, people don't seem to mind putting out a few dollars more a month, which is the most this will cost, when they know exactly where their money is going, especially when it is absolutely necessary in order to protect their safety, which is true in this case.

Another possible down side, in some people's opinion, is that the money could be spent for other worthwhile projects, like schools or recreation for young people. In our reports on the jail, we think we've adequately made the case that we must either buy the building now or later, after we've had to pay up on a lawsuit or two, or give another county a lot of money to take care of our prisoners.

If the concern is about priorities, the question is not whether we should spend money on a justice system OR facilities for our kids. The question is whether or not individual taxpayers are willing to watch one less video a month, or skip one night out every two or three months, if even that is necessary, so that we can lock away the people that earn their livings selling drugs to our kids, beat us up, maim or kill us on the highway because they're drunk, abuse their spouses or children, burglarize our homes and businesses.

Tuesday we'll see how serious Wasatch County voters are about eliminating plea bargaining that lets criminals off too easy, as well as all the other reasons this county isn't being tough on them. When the votes are in, we'll know what this community's priorities are, and how angry the citizens are about crime.

Officials Explain Confusing Wording in County Bond Proposal

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The Wasatch County commissioners and attorney are concerned that the wording in the proposal to issue \$5.52 million in bonds to build a new justice building, that county voters are being asked to approve next Tuesday, may be confusing to voters.

The ballot says the bonds will "be issued and sold for the purpose of paying all or part of the cost of acquiring, constructing, improving, extending or renovating one or more public buildings and other public facilities..." The language is very broad and may give the im-

pression that the money could be used for a variety of purposes besides the justice building, or that only part of the building would be paid for from the funds, and that taxpayers could be asked to approve additional funding later.

The language does specifically limit spending of the bond money to "administration of justice and law enforcement activities." However, other wording is rather broad because neither the building design nor the details for financing the project are final yet, the officials stated for the record, during a regu-

lar commission meeting.

Ultimately, the county will only pay for part of the building because the state will pay about \$1.4 million for the courtroom and court-related office space. However, if the legislature doesn't appropriate the state's share so that it can be paid up front, it will be paid in annual payments and the county will have to issue bonds for the entire project.

The broad language also is necessary because a site for the building hasn't even been selected yet. It could be property the county already owns, or it may have to be pur-

chased. Therefore, officials are making sure that if voters approve the proposal, there will be enough money to cover the cost of property

and installing utilities if it is in an undeveloped section of the county, and that the wording doesn't hold them to a specific plan.

The officials also have stated that they are asking voters to approve the highest possible amount the project could cost to make sure they don't have to ask citizens for more later, which could make them feel they have been deceived.